

# Hints and tips for writing news articles

## 1. *What's the hook?*

To begin, ask yourself why you are writing your article. Is it really newsworthy? Will people be interested? Your story must have a compelling news angle otherwise people won't read it. Also ask yourself how your story illustrates and supports the University, Faculty, School or Divisional strategy. Ideally the narrative should reflect and link back to one or more of our strategic pillars - Research, Teaching, Learning and Students, and Social Responsibility.

## 2. *Gather your information*

Make sure you include all the key facts and figures by asking yourself who, what, when and where. Speak to the key stakeholders to check that you haven't overlooked anything.

## 3. *Identify your key messages*

You should decide which pieces of information are most important to include, which are less important, and then establish a hierarchy. What are the three key things that you want the reader to remember? Focus on the critical points and make sure these are included in the opening paragraphs.

## 4. *Know your audience*

Think about your audience - not necessarily what interests you most about the article you are writing, but what will interest a more general readership. While colleagues at the University have a certain level of understanding of many issues, not everyone may have the depth of knowledge of your particular specialism - academic or otherwise. As you stare at the blank screen try to imagine the average reader.

## 5. *Keep it short and simple*

All of us have busy schedules and do not have the time or inclination to wade through pages of text and long complicated words and sentences. Get your key points across clearly and succinctly, ideally within a maximum of four or five paragraphs. Do not try to show off your extensive vocabulary – be specific and concise. Technical and scientific terms aside, nobody is impressed by the use of a word they do not understand or would not use in everyday speech. Every sentence must be clear at one glance, and every story must have something meaningful to say.

## 6. *The introduction is crucial*

Get your reader hooked with the first sentence or two and they'll want to know more. Sometimes you'll need to go into detail, but don't dilute or overshadow the main story. What will your audience be most interested in? Whatever it is, lead with that. A good introduction declares why the story is being published, what is the newest, most interesting, most important aspect of the story. It is not a summary of everything to come in the rest of the article. The best introduction will contain a maximum of two or three facts, maybe only one, and will encourage you to read on.

## 7. *Try to use active rather than passive tenses*

Always use the active tense in news writing, particularly in the opening paragraph. The active tense is faster and more immediate; it also uses fewer words. For example: "Arsenal were beaten by Manchester United last night ..." is slower than "Manchester United beat Arsenal ..."

**8. *Try to be positive even when it's negative***

Wherever possible, try to avoid negatives - news is more engaging if it describes something that is happening, rather than something that is not. For example, instead of "The government has decided not to introduce the planned tax increase on petrol and diesel this autumn", it would be better to say "The government has abandoned plans to raise fuel taxes this autumn."

**9. *Use meaningful adjectives***

Avoid adjectives unless they have something to say. An adjective should be clear and precise; it should not raise questions, it should answer them. For example, 'angry' informs, whereas 'tall' invites the question, how tall? If adjectives add relevantly to the information being provided, they can stay. If not, take them out. Too many writers believe adjectives add colour and style. Vague or general ones add nothing.

**10. *Keep quotes brief***

Long quotes bring a story grinding to a halt; whereas short, incisive, direct quotes change the pace of a story, add colour and character, illustrate facts, and introduce personal experience. Professional journalists often paraphrase speeches and reports to focus on the main points, and to make them shorter and more comprehensible.

Never use a word other than "said" when attributing a quote. Affirmed, opined, exclaimed, interjected, asserted, declared, are all tacky synonyms which do nothing to help the flow of the story.

**11. *Avoid officialese***

Official sounding language, typically used in letters from bank managers, council officers, and read by police officers giving evidence in court should always be avoided. People do not "proceed"; they walk. Police do not "apprehend"; they stop, arrest or detain. "At this point in time" is now.

**12. *Explain abbreviations and acronyms***

Like all organisations, here at the University we're surrounded by abbreviations and acronyms - but don't assume that everyone knows what they mean. Internal news stories have a habit of being posted externally to a wider audience, who may be unfamiliar with even some of our more obvious acronyms. The first time an acronym or abbreviation is used in any news story, it should be explained in full in brackets. Thereafter the acronym can be used in the rest of the article.